



# Autism-Ready Libraries

Early Literacy Services for Autistic  
Children and Their Families in Public  
Libraries

# The Autism-Ready Libraries Team

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# Presentation Overview



Why Autism-Ready Libraries?



Goals and Objectives



Study Design



Findings



Autism-Ready Libraries Toolkit



Questions



# First, a note on language...

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- **What is autism?**
- Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects how autistic people experience and interact with the world, and is a core part of autistic identity (ASAN, 2022)
- **Why identity first language?**
- Identity-first language is preferred by autistic advocates and is supported by new American Psychological Association (APA) bias-free language standards (Robinson, 2019; APA, 2020)





# Why Autism-Ready Libraries?



## Why Early Literacy?

Autistic children are **not adequately supported** in early literacy in formal and informal education

(Westerveld et al., 2016) (Van der Schuitt et al., 2009; Beuscher, 2014)



## Why public libraries?

Public libraries provide **essential informal learning** opportunities for communities in need

Library storytime programs **promote early literacy skills**

(Garmer, 2014)(Albright et al., 2009; ALA 2006)



## *Libraries are Not Accessible to Autistic Children and Their Families*

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- Many **environmental barriers** exist for autistic children and their families in libraries (Baron, 2006; Bagby et al., 2012; Kern et al., 2006)
- Few early literacy programs are **accessible** to autistic children and their families (Matoushek et al., 2017; Schriar et al., 2016)
- Librarians do not yet have sufficient **research-based training** to provide inclusive early literacy services (Kaeding, Velasquez, & Price, 2017; Paynter, 2020; Prendergast, 2016)

# Goals & Objectives

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Autism-Ready Libraries aims to **improve** libraries' capacity to **provide early literacy** programming to autistic children and their families by:



**Amplifying** the voices and needs of families with autistic children in libraries



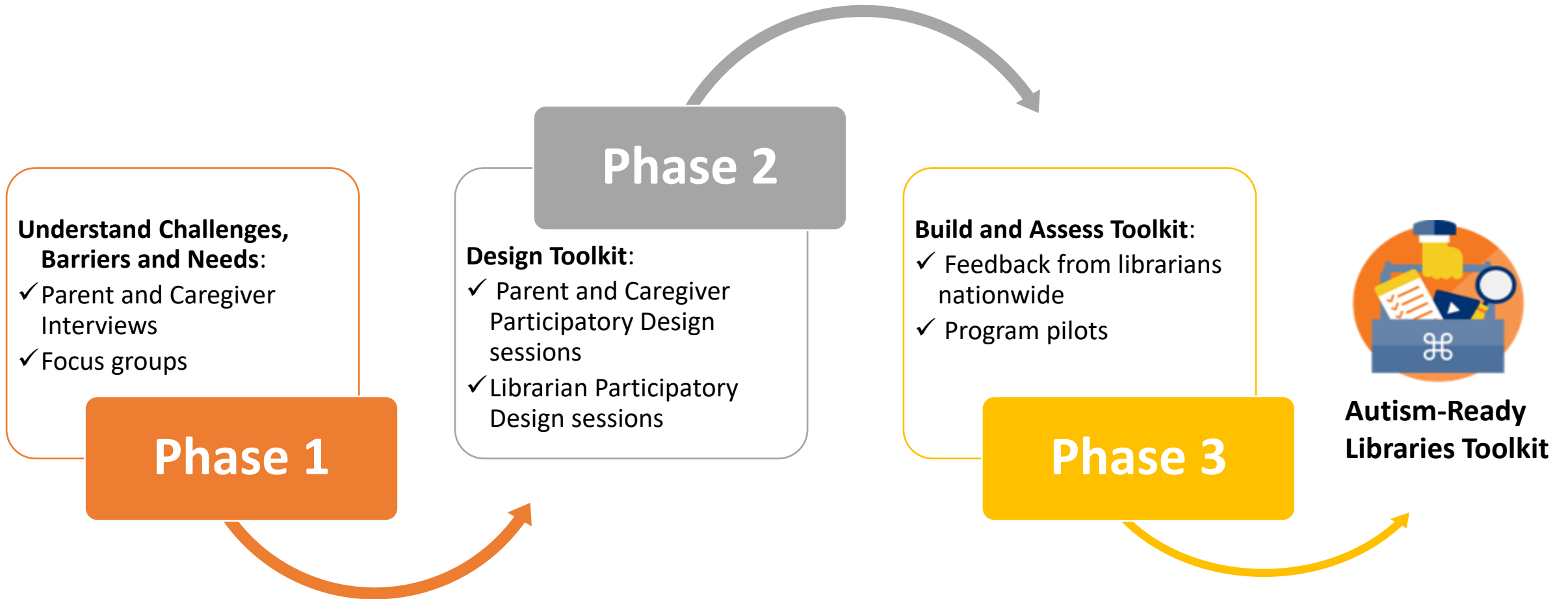
**Partnering** with children's librarians at WA libraries



**Utilizing** focus groups and participatory design to empower participants



# Study Design: How did we make the Toolkit?



*Thank you to our library partners KCLS and Pierce County Libraries!*



# Findings: Barriers experienced by families

*"As a mother with children on the spectrum, the library's just not a place where you think, 'This is where I'm going to take my kid,' [...] because the library's seen as a quiet place."*

Families with autistic children feel unwelcome in libraries

Fear being judged by other library patrons and by library staff

Fluorescent lights and unexpected noises often painful for autistic children

Limit library use with their children

Families with autistic children avoid library programs

Sensory needs not met (i.e. bright lights, large groups, loud sounds or music)

Fear child's behaviors disruptive

# Findings: Barriers identified by librarians

*"We just don't have the time or funding to make these programs a priority"*

Librarians are not  
given adequate  
resources

Limited funding available for inclusive services and programs

Time and scheduling constraints limit programs and outreach capability

Lack of organizational support and community connections

Librarians lack  
access to training

Training on autism not provided by library system

Available trainings do not cover early literacy or outreach

# Findings: Enablers

## Autism-Inclusive Programs

- Foster inclusion
- Provide multiple methods of participation, engagement, representation
- Different types of programs for different needs

## Adaptive Customer Services

- Supportive of families' communication, instructional, and navigation needs
- Flexible to accessibility needs related to services

## Resources to Meet Information Needs

- Individualized reader's advisory
- Information and resources re: autism and early literacy
- Detailed descriptions of library program activities and schedules

*"... making expectations really clear from the start, not just me going in thinking I have to sit here quietly with him, but maybe saying, 'It's okay if your kid needs to get up and move...'"*

# Findings: Key Practices

FOSTER	PROVIDE	OFFER	MEET	RECOGNIZE
<p><i>Foster a community of inclusion</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Welcome families</li><li>✓ Set inclusive patron expectations</li><li>✓ Advertise inclusion</li></ul>	<p><i>Provide an accessible environment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Remove physical and sensory barriers where possible</li><li>✓ Provide sensory support items &amp; offer quiet escape areas</li></ul>	<p><i>Offer multiple methods of representation &amp; engagement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Support individual communication needs</li><li>✓ Provide visual supports</li></ul>	<p><i>Meet families where they are</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Address children directly</li><li>✓ Promote programs and services through outreach</li></ul>	<p><i>Recognize each child's diverse interests, strengths, and needs</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Support individual needs</li><li>✓ Tailor reader's advisory using interests &amp; strengths</li></ul>



# Findings: Needed Training and Resources

## Training

- Autism Acceptance & Inclusion
- Adaptive Customer Service
- Inclusive Early Literacy Services

## Resources

- Environmental audit checklists
- Sensory kits
- Visual supports
- Parent resources
- Advocacy guide
- Community outreach guide
- Professional Learning Community Guide

## Program Planning Tools

- Early literacy program plans & curriculum
- Examples of successful programs
- Storytime booklists



[tinyurl.com/  
3mm3d5hr](https://tinyurl.com/3mm3d5hr)



# AUTISM-READY LIBRARIES TOOLKIT



## Training

- Autism Acceptance & Inclusion
- Autism-Inclusive Customer Service
- Inclusive Early Literacy Services



## Resources

- Planning
- Customer Services
- Library Staff Support



# Autism Acceptance & Inclusion Training



Addresses social barriers



Strategies for Inclusion



Understanding Autism



# Autism-Inclusive Customer Service Training



Addresses  
communication barriers



Providing supports



Inclusive patron  
expectations





# Inclusive Early Literacy Services Training



Address sensory and  
participation barriers



Autism-inclusive  
early literacy engagement



Multiple methods  
of participation





## Resources

AUTISM-READY  
LIBRARIES

# Visual Supports

## A how-to guide



A guide to using visual information to support autistic children and their families at your library including:

- Creating visual supports
- Displaying visual supports
- Assessing visual supports with your community



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## Resources

# Sensory Kit Checklist



The sensory kit checklist is designed to help library professionals improve access to the library for autistic children and their families by providing sensory support items. This resource includes:



- A checklist of items to include in a sensory kit
- Descriptions of each item
- How to use a sensory kit at your library





# Questions & Discussion

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- What **questions** do you have for me?
- What's one thing you're **excited to use** in the Autism-Ready Libraries Toolkit?
- Other feedback?





THANK

YOU!

# Thank You!

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